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ABSTRACT

This paper questions some of the assumptions that permeate the current literature about soap operas and television, examining particularly the model according to which soap operas are the expression of an "essential" and universal feminine nature. The paper suggests the pertinence of a crosscultural approach to the study of melodrama as well as the need to address television as an expressive materiality that is aesthetically and rhetorically meaningful. The paper uses Louis Hjelmslev's semiotical model, as well as the rhetorical concepts of archetype, motive, and situated discourse. It also proposes the concept of "rhetoric of presentation" for describing the visual modes of address and positioning that are proper to daytime melodrama; it is a perspective of analysis from which to explore the text's concrete materiality and to visualize its relations with the ideological and cultural dimensions of the text. The paper is divided into eight sections: (1) Towards a Semiotical Reading of Soap Operas; (2) Criticism and the Materiality of the Text; (3) Art and the Popular; (4) The Frontiers of Soap Opera; (5) Rhetoric and the Generic Constraint; (6) Making Strange the Familiar Codes; (7) The Rhetoric of Presentation; and (8) Conclusion. Thirty references are attached. (Author/SR)

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Student Debut Paper

Soap Operas and Telenovelas:

An Intercultural Critique of Soap Operas as Feminine Discourse

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Abstract

Soap operas and Telenovelas:

An Intercultural Critique of Soap operas as Feminine Discourse

This paper questions some of the presumptions that permeate the current literature about soap operas and television. It examines particularly the model according to which soap operas are the expression of an "essential" and universal feminine nature. The paper suggests the pertinence of a crosscultural approach to study melodrama as well as the need to address television as an expressive materiality that is aesthetically and rhetorically meaningful. The paper uses Louis Hjelmslev's semiotical model, as well as the rhetorical concepts of archetype, motive, and situated discourse. It also proposes the concept of "rhetoric of presentation" for describing the visual modes of address and positioning that are proper to daytime melodrama.

Towards a Semiotical Reading of Soap Opera

The Nature of the Sign.

In general terms a sign is, as Saussure explains it, an entity composed by a signifier or "sign-vehicle" and a signified or "meaning" (Eco, 1979a). Even though this explanation is adequate for understanding the communicative capacity of the sign, it turns to be somehow incomplete should the sign's semiotical composition and aesthetical dimensions be understood (Eco, 1979a). In an attempt to refine and make more explicit the Saussurian concept, the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965) proposed that the two planes of the sign, the expression (i.e. the signifier) and the content (i.e. the signified) must be thought of having their own form (i.e. a system, a code), and their own substance (i.e. units, actualized elements of the system).

Form and substance

The form, as Hjelmslev understands it, is an established system that generates units; a background from which elements are selected to be actualized in a peculiar way. Placing it with a rhetorical analogy, the form is a repertoire, the substance is the selected and combined motifs from this repertoire. Using Kenneth Burke's and Northrop Frye's categories, while the substance calls attention to the text's motivational dimension, the form presupposes its archetypal constitution (Harrell and Linkugel, 1980). An examination of a televisual genre (e.g. soap opera) from this perspective can explore what makes it particularly American and different from other genres (the

motivational dimension); or point to what could be a primary melodramatic structure and basic narrative pattern present in different cultures and social formations (the archetypal dimension).

Content and expression

The content is the semantical level of the text: specific relationships, actions, and conflicts which embody mythological constructions, cultural appreciations, and collective imagery.

The expression, on the other hand, can be described as the way in which the content is communicated. The sign-vehicle, as Eco calls it, is nevertheless more than a neutral carrier. It is a cultural construction, thus one that can be read rhetorically and aesthetically, as well as ideologically and symbolically.

What Jakobson calls the text's "poetic function" and Eco its "aesthetical labor" is made especially clear on the Hjelmslevian model for it considers the expression as having a significative status of its own (Eco, 1979a). Texts mean not only because of a content, but also because of a presentation of the content. The expressive dimension, then, points out the rhetorical nature of the human discourse and the relevance of rhetorical investigation for an understanding of meaning.

The Sign-Function

According to the above model, the sign is not an entity but a point of encounter, more a "sign-function" (it is unstable and flexible) than a "sign", which suggests a fixed nature and identity (Eco, 1979a). The sign does not exist physically but

as the cultural point in which the four mentioned dimensions converge. The same expression, in consequence, can correspond to different contents; a content can be associated with different expressions; and both content and expression can be read (i.e. decoded) with the use of different codes.

What this implies is that there might be different, contradictory, and still equally satisfactory forms of reading a text. And yet, one of these readings will be dominant and privileged as correct (Fiske, 1987), while the others will be assumed as "aberrant" (Eco 1979b) or disruptive (Fiske, 1987). This reflection has important consequences for the appraisal of the work of art, the study of the mass media, and the practice of criticism.

Criticism and the Materiality of the Text

When Foucault (1966) was studying the Velasquez's "Meninas," he accompanied his theoretical reflection with a photograph of the painture. Eco (1964) studied the complexity of comics narrative based on the reproduction and semiotical analysis of "Steve Canyon's" introductory strip. Barthes (1964) based his discussion of the rhetoric of the image on the analysis and reproduction of a magazine advertisement. The three authors considered it important to have the "original" texts, their material presence, in order to study them. Instead of telling the images, they showed them; they denotated them.

When Ellen Seiter (1987) was discussing the relevance of semiotics for television analysis, she selected as an example the

introductory sequence of the "Cosby Show" credits. And "told" the sequence. Arguing that she was describing the credits' denotative level, Seiter "wrote down" the image, which turned to be something like "long shot; two shot; medium gray limbo backdrop. Strong key light on left casts shadows towards right edge of frame", and the like (Seiter, 1987, p. 33). The fact that the audiovisual text was placed in linguistical terms did not prevent Seiter from claiming that she was actually denotating the text, that is, showing "the image itself" and the object that was "before the camera" (Seiter, p. 29).

According to Seiter's analysis, then, there is no significative difference between the Cosby Show's script and the audiovisual sequence; they remain essentially the same text. After all, the images Seiter is dealing with are made to be functional, direct, and clear. They are televisual and conventional, not artistic and original; they can be translated into words without any important loss. Moreover, the critic can rely on the social knowledge of the televisual image. Everybody knows the Cosby Show sequence; everybody is familiar with the image. This allows the television critic to do what in film analyses (which are equally unable of reproducing an image that is not static) will be considered impossible: to describe exhaustively images -or any text, for that matter. The only way of doing so would be to show or reproduce the text, as Foucault, Eco, and Barthes did on the examples cited. The fact that this is not possible with a motion picture does not simplify the

critical task, but instead redefines it.

In contrast with the case of film, publicity, or cartoons (whose visual components are examined as significant in themselves), the televisual image seems to be literal, natural, and non-ambiguous. In consequence, while television programming has been widely studied as ideological content, few efforts have been conducted toward an examination of its modes of expression, particularly toward its visual materiality.

It is interesting that the genre which is being explicitly addressed in terms of its visual rhetoric (i.e. Music Television's rock video) is also the one which breaks the codes of realism (Kaplan, 1987). Because of its disregard of conventional realism, the rock video reveals more clearly the "arbitrariness" of its composition, thus calling attention to what in other genres remains unnoticed and naturalized. The rock video makes strange what other televisual genres make familiar: the image. Television still is a "window" to the world. But even windows imply frames.

The Materiality of the Text

The different forms in which one can be "loyal" to a text depends basically on what is assumed to be relevant and significative about it, and on the restrictions placed by its physical characteristics. Foucault, for instance, used a photograph of "Las Meninas", supriming then, part of the painture's "original" characteristics (size, texture, tri-dimensionality). Barthes took the pasta advertisement out of its

original placement on a magazine. Seiter took the visual image out of an analysis of a visual text.

When the importance of a text is placed on its "message" and referential capability, its other dimensions become irrelevant and even disturbing. This is the case of texts that are considered functional, and of analysis that focus on effects, causes, and functions. If the way a text tells seems to be as important as what it tells, and even its very source, the text's materiality cannot be omitted without missing the text itself. This is the case of discourses considered artistic, and of studies focusing on the aesthetics of the text.

Art and the Popular

According to the Russian formalist Shklovsky, what characterizes something as poetic (i.e. artistic) is its ostranenie, its ability to "make strange" the familiar (Hawkes, 1977). Art is characterized basically by the placement of familiar forms in unexpected ways that call attention to their obscured, hidden dimensions. The artistic text seems to keep open its whole denotative capacity (Barthes, cited by Seiter, 1987). It is uncertain, ambiguous, and not "calcified" by routine and habit (Jamieson, 1973).

Many objects that were in a time considered common, functional, or vulgar acquired an aesthetical status once they became "obsolete." That is, "demode," not popular, not reproduced anymore, scarce, and, then, worthy. By lack of reproduction the "vulgar" acquires singularity, interest, and

value. It is a piece of collection, a form that cannot be repeated anymore. This logic of appraisal by defamiliarization has been clear in the recent history of the visual arts. The advent of the soundtrack allowed to appreciate the poetic dimension of the silent film. Black and white film gained an especial aesthetical value when it was replaced by color film. Film became artistic with the creation of television.

The artistic seems to be different and unique by the very fact of being distant. That is, remote in space and time, not familiar, and ciphered. It is secret, it cannot be comprehended, it cannot be fully possessed. Its form is obscure and fascinating, unreduceable and inexhaustible. Art, then, is almost by principle what is not popular. That is, what is not ordinary, accessible, prevalent, or proletarian. Art has a class status.

Folk music becomes classic when the folks stop dancing to it (as it is the case of waltzes, jazz, and Andean music). Popular tales are literature when nobody tells them anymore. Perhaps soap operas will be considered a superb example of aesthetical achievement once the folks -especially the female folks- do not use them anymore. Not being used, but contemplated, appears to be one of the requirements of the object of art.

Dying (i.e. becoming distant), then, seems to be a precondition for the popular to become artistic. If this is so, there is nothing intrinsically better in art, but the very fact of not being too popular, too conventional, too "understood" in a

standard way. The famous French-American painter Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) shocked the high-art world by exhibiting a water closet as his art production. Art is whatever the artist wants it to be, he claimed. In other words, art is whatever is legitimized as such.

Some consequences can be inferred from this argument: First, that art is a matter of convention, and not of intrinsic qualities; second, that any cultural object can be aesthetically read; third, that this activity requires observing the object from new perspectives (i.e. defamiliarizing it, placing it in new contexts); fourth, that by means of this activity common forms lose their innocence, their transparency, and their necessity; fifth, that their rhetorical status can be made apparent; and sixth, that by this activity the grounds for a rhetoric of culture can be defined.

It is on the grounds of a rhetoric of culture that an analysis of the most popular (i.e. less artistic) mass medium and of its most generic, conventionalized, and transparent genre (i.e. soap operas) can give important and interesting insights.

The Frontiers of Soap Opera

The soap opera genre is characterized by a serial form, and a melodramatic content. At this general level, soaps do not only exist in the U.S.A. but are also produced in places as diverse as Great Britain, Australia, India, Japan, (Reed, 1987) as well as the Latin American countries in general. At a more situational level, nevertheless, these texts differ significantly

from one another, to the point of questioning the pertinence of the name "soap operas" for, say, American and Latin American productions. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the American version as "soap opera", to the Latin American as "telenovela", and to the general format as "serial".

The World According to America

By being explicit about these terms, it is possible to avoid the common tendency to speak of American soap operas as the necessary shape of the serial. It has been argued, for example, that soap opera is "the most popular feminine visual art" because of the relationship between a women's subjectivity and a narrative that is antiprogressive, open-ended, and decentered (Modlesky, 1982). "[The housewife's] work, like a soap opera, is never done" (Modlesky, p. 101). Even though this is arguable in the American and the British cases, the absence of final resolution cannot be assumed as an intrinsic characteristic of the "most popular feminine art." The Latin American serial, for example, is a story that does progress, reach a narrative climax, and end in less than two years. By using a category such as the "feminine visual art," the author risks to imply that the American soap opera is a universal form that responds to the nature of a universal feminine subjectivity. Soap opera characteristics become, then, necessary instead of situational; natural instead of conventional. Such confusion, often implicit in the literature, could be avoided should the critics make explicit the cultural boundaries of their analysis: "serials"

mean American or Anglo-Saxon serials and "feminine" means American women. Otherwise, a wide and rich category like "feminine visual art" would simply and mistakenly mean "American housewife's favorite show." A lack of awareness of the cultural nature of television can obscure its historical and situated dimensions.

A consequence of this absence of historical understanding (Hardt, 1988) is the tendency in many mass media studies (e.g. Modlesky, 1982; Rosen, 1986) to emphasize the uniqueness of the phenomenon studied (i.e. its positive value) instead of its dialectical value (its value for opposition and contrast). The object studied, therefore, stands alone, self-contained, and central. All the lights converge on it statically, so the scenery, the action, and the dialogue with other actors is missed, obscured or forgotten.

There is no dialectic between it and its context; no dialogue between its form and other cultural forms. One can understand, then, the force of a reasoning like "if television is violent, then the audience is (or is not) violent." This assumption is at the core of reasoning like Modlesky's: if feminine work does not end and soap operas do not end, then soaps are popular among women. The mechanistic principle of this argument is made apparent if it is used to describe the Latin American case: feminine work does not end, and telenovelas do end, so, we should expect them not to be popular among women?

Critics too often speak of television as a shorter

expression for American television. And America itself is a shorter expression for the United States of America, an economy of language that expresses also a political economy. It is in fact this phenomenon which allows the U.S.A to be identified with the continent. The U.S.A takes the place of the world and the world is understood in American terms. It is possible then, to speak of "the role of women in culture" (Allen, 1983) while referring to the Anglo-Saxon cultures. What Hanno Hardt (1988) alleges about American comparative media research can be applied to studies like the mentioned: there is a certain tendency to understand "the world according to America" and forget the existence of cultural differences.

A Brief Account of "Soaps" and "Novelas"

On the following account I will refer specifically to Colombian television, which is often, but not always, a representative case of a most general, Latin American situation. By "Colombian television" I am referring to television broadcasted in Colombia but not necessarily produced in this country. It included, in 1987, Mexican, Venezuelan, Brazilian, American, and British programs sharing primetime with Colombian productions (Lozano, 1987). This is an important consideration for while American -commercial- television is homogeneously American, its Latin American counterpart represents the confluence of at least three cultures and productions: national, Latin American, and Anglo-Saxon. American television articulates the many voices of one culture. Latin American television shows the many cultures

of one voice, so to speak.

Soap operas can be broadcast for as much as thirty years (Allen, 1983). Telenovelas are considered too long when they last more than one year. They are not supposed to last but to tell a -long- story and finish. Soaps operas do not end. If they are not broadcast anymore is because they were cancelled; not because they finished their story (Cassata and Skill, 1983; Allen, 1983).

Both soap operas and telenovelas can be considered the feminine genre of television. Telenovelas, nevertheless, have become more than feminine, and indeed represent a national passion (Rodriguez, 1988). People are watching them (at least in Brazil and Colombia) regardless of gender, social class, or educational level (Martin-Barbero, personal communication, 1987). It was a popular Latin American saying that telenovelas were for maids, that is, for lower class, ignorant female viewers. Besides its highly pejorative tone, the above statement was quite accurate. Classic telenovelas respond to gender and class. They are feminine and popular (i.e. the favorite of the populace), and thus are depreciated by the middle class, educated male. It is interesting to note the close links among ignorance, gender, and class. Lower class implies less education, which means lower culture. In the same vein the feminine gender implies lower education and lower culture. By means of this configuration, the feminine and the "lower" are basic articulations of the Latin American popular cultures as they were

of the Medieval popular traditions (personal communication, Martin-Barbero, 1987). The image of the maid is highly effective for it synthesizes, in the Latin American imagery, the three dimensions mentioned.

One can say that there are at least two types of telenovelas in Colombia: the "modern" and the "classic". While the classic articulates extreme oppositions -poor/rich, good/bad, innocence/perversion- the modern is ambiguous, ambivalent, and anarchical. The heroes are often ridiculized, and the clowns (a figure that also exists in soap operas) are taken seriously. The tragedy of everyday life expressed in classic telenovelas has become irony and comedy.

Classic telenovelas hardly ever verbalize the middle class. Its "purport" (Eco, 1979a) is the confrontation of the rich and the poor: the country-sider, modest girl who is seduced by the villain and marries the wealthy heir. These telenovelas are to some extent the symbolic revenge of the poor and the victory of the oppressed. There is always a final achievement of social justice, mythically expressed in the death of a wealthy villain and the enrichment of a poor victim. On the plane of the narrative, these telenovelas emphasize the symbolic over the referential, the metaphorical over the metonymical, and the archetypal over the circumstantial. Modern telenovelas express the contrary tendency. They are moving from antithetic characters to ambivalent ones, from estereotypical to typical situations, and from black-and-white to gray representations of

life. The villains have become less bad, the poor less innocent, the middle class less insignificant, and the plots less predictable.

Improvisation and flexibility are at the core of modern telenovelas' narrative. The "porosity" of their structure makes them loose enough to change their dramatic motives as the story progresses, as well as extremely receptive to the external happenings and news. It is not difficult to see its ancestor in the Middle Ages street-rambler theater that wandered from town to town reciting the same story but adapting jokes, characters, and settings according to each town's villains, heroes, and current events.

The soap opera's never-ending structure deeply affects the very nature of the narrative. A telenovela remains a single story, despite its many branches and secondary stories. A soap opera on the other hand, is less a story than a structure for generating stories. If telenovelas resemble more the structure of the classic melodrama (it is long and intricate but it eventually has an end) the soap opera recalls the structure of the classic "feuilleton" -a periodical pamphlet that tells the innumerable adventures of the hero. Like "Superman," the soap has an infinite capacity for new episodes. Unlike "Superman," these episodes are motivated, progressive, linear, and melodramatic.

Finally, there are interesting relations that deserve further attention: between modernity-tradition, masculinity-

femininity, integration-diversity and the night-day schedules of television. Daytime soap operas seem to be more traditional, women-oriented and jealous of a narrative that has often been explained as disruptive (Fiske, 1987; Modlesky, 1982). Primetime soap operas, on the other hand, tend to be more sophisticated and modern (Modlesky, 1982), male- and family-oriented, and structured more according to dominant masculine treatments and genres (Fiske, 1987). Perhaps this modernization, also present in telenovelas, is another name for legitimation and acceptance of the dominant patrons of taste and storytelling.

This very brief account of some of the characteristics of telenovelas and soap operas only intended to show the possible richness of a crosscultural study of the genre, in which Northrop Frye's concept of "archetype" and Burke's notion of "motive" could be articulated to explore both the archetypal and the situated dimensions of the melodramatic serial (Harrell, and Linkugel, 1980).

Rhetoric and the Generic Constraint

The very presentation of a text "situates" it, names it, praises it, and suggests the codes by which it is supposed to be deciphered. Its rhetorical "regime" privileges certain modes of reading and makes more or less explicit the rules of the interpretive game. This labor is more a matter of placing in context than of grasping structures, for these are mobilized, charged, and made meaningful by the event, by the very materiality in which the text "takes place" (Andrew, 1984). This

is more notorious when conventions -and in consequence, expectations- are broken.

The first sketch of the film "Aria" (a collection of sketches directed by different film-makers) is a humorous cartoon. The public laughs openly at Bugs Bunny singing arias. When it finishes and the second sketch begins, the public keeps laughing for some minutes at images that lately are discovered to be serious and dramatic. Jamieson (1977) cites the case of "Bonnie and Clyde," which disturbed the audiences expectations by mixing comedy conventions with a violent plot.

The Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges imagined a writer who copies Cervantes' "Don Quijote de la Mancha" and publishes it as if it were his own, modern version. The critic reviewing this "new" book finds enormous, powerful differences between it and Cervantes'. The former is an entirely new version, he alleges; a modern saga that shows all the conflicts of modernity; all the contradictions of the middle class man.

The text was the same; the reading of the text was completely different, for it was deciphered as belonging to two different systems of reference and "genres". One was a 16th century parody; the other was a modern parody of the 16th century. Two different rhetorical regimes were at operation.

Making Strange the Familiar Codes

Understanding of a cultural form can be gained by making it strange, by bracketing it, by approaching it in new ways and reconsidering its taken-for-granted shape. Examining a text as

it is commonly read allows us to elucidate its activated meanings and privileged connotations (Fiske, 1987). Examining it against new, nonhabitual contexts gives us back its capacity of "unfreezed" signification (Barthes, cited by Seiter, 1987). The familiar context explains the dominant function of the sign, the strange suggests its plurality. It opens the room for new chains of intertextuality, for new ways of reading.

In the case of the study of American soap operas, the first option is to focus on the viewers' actual interpretations (Fiske, 1987). The second option is to study the rhetorical and aesthetical resources that permeate the texts. If the former aims to reproduce the conditions in which the soap is watched, the latter disrupts these conditions, plays with the text, relocates its units, brackets its narrative. Both perspectives are important and can be complementary. While the content of the text cannot be grasped but on its viewers, its expression (its aesthetics and rhetoric of presentation) has to be explored on its materiality.

Hitherto, research on soap operas has focused on the first option, that is, on studying soap opera's content and social uses (see Fiske, 1987, and Allen, 1987). Research of this kind needs to take the text "for granted" in order to explore its social implications and significance. What is studied is not the text's presence and materiality, but its connoted meanings.

In the second option the very text is questioned. That is, its concrete presence, flow, texture, organization, arrangement,

and composition. In other words, its aesthetics and rhetoric. What I propose here is a perspective of analysis from which to explore this concrete materiality, and to visualize its relations with the ideological and cultural dimensions of the text. The level of expression on soap operas has been obscured by its very clarity. It is harder to explore for it is too near, too obvious, and too familiar. I propose here to study the evident (i.e. "natural") in order to decipher its conventional and ideological nature.

The Rhetoric of Presentation

Martin-Barbero (personal communication, 1987) has proposed that for the study of telenovelas the Hjelmslevian model can be expressed as: (a) the representation's purport, (b) the imagery's structure, (c) the medium's language, and d) the narrative form (1). Elsewhere I began an exploration of these four dimensions. On the present case I will concentrate on the latter, specifically to what I have called the rhetoric of presentation.

The rhetoric of presentation literally presents the text, names it, and situates it means of style resources proper of the genre: Nomination, the metalinguistical, self-presentation of the soap; composition, the way soap opera creates space and time, sets quotidianity, constructs bodies, objects, and settings, and glamourizes conflict. It emphasizes continuity over closure, redundancy over economy, and suspense over resolution; anchoring, the extent to which the soap is porous and receptive to the

happenings of the external world (other soaps, other genres, other tales); and melodramatization (i.e. exaggeration, and hyperbolization).

Melodrama is not only a matter of content but also of iconography. It is a resource by which the insignificant, trivial, and circumstantial (according to legitimate standards) becomes significant, transcendent, and essential: soap operas invert the "relevance" hierarchy exhibited in more respected genres (e.g. the news). They don't treat important, but personal themes; they "exaggerate" emotions, make big what is small, catastrophic what is just adverse, glorious what is earthy, great what is routine. They don't inform but gossip. The similarity between this characterization of melodrama and the images of the "feminine" is at least suggestive. After all, soaps are gendered television (Fiske, 1987).

Is the Soap a Text?

The first task that the critic faces while studying soap operas is to define the spatial and temporal limits of her/his object. What can constitute a complete text within the soap opera? What are its units of expression and content?

Allen (1983) has asserted that the only way of reading the complete text of a soap opera would be to watch "all its episodes broadcast since it began" (Allen, p. 98). This would mean to deal with a "mega-text which has, in some cases, taken shape over the course of 30-or more- years" (Allen, p.98). Such a megatext would be a saga, then, that very few of the viewers -if any-

would have read. Allen concludes that the soap opera text is impossible to specify and that its narrative "lacks closure -one of the defining characteristics of narrative" (Allen, p.99). Does this argument imply that soap operas cannot be studied as narrative and texts?

If the length of a soap opera shows that it cannot be reached on its absolute magnitude, it also suggests that soap opera is not a single text (a statement that is perhaps obvious, in spite of its controversial appearance). Otherwise it would be necessary to claim that even though nobody can read it, see it, or speak about it, there is a 30-year-old text called soap opera. This is a metaphysical disquisition and a useless category, at least from the point of view of semiotics. As Eco (1979a) would say, a text is less a physical entity than the act of reading the text. Thus, what a text is, its limits, configuration, and shape is defined by the reader (i.e. the act of being read) and not by fixed and external standards. According to such standards (i.e. texts should have beginning, middle, and end) a soap opera would have to be thought of as a text that cannot be read for the viewer did not see its Beginning (back in 1958) and cannot see its End (it still extends itself to the future).

The very fact that the text Allen proposes cannot be read, should have suggested to him that it was not a text; that what he spoke about was an inadequate category of analysis. In fact, what Allen proposes as a soap opera's singularity can be said of any text. What is the beginning of "Don Quijote"? Since this

book presupposes the cavalry books, and these presuppose medieval literature, the "Don Quijote" text extends itself for centuries. Allen has confounded the beginning -a narrative category- with the origin -a metaphysical category. Soap operas do have beginning-middle-end, which do not correspond to the time of the broadcasting but to the structure of the narrative. Moreover, a soap opera is not a single text: it is a space for various texts that can be delimited and approached in different ways.

It is possible to argue that the soap has the content of a saga and the form of a myth. As the saga, the soap opera tells the multiple deeds of a family or group, and is as diverse and unlimited as these deeds can be. As the myth, the soap opera is less a story than a structure for generating stories (Levy-Strauss, 1972). Its sense of order and wholeness resides less on the "bricolageous" content (i.e. one that is constructed in a continuous dialogue with the users, being then, flexible, changing, and unpredictable) than on a structure of repetitive patterns. Its articulation of beginning-middle-end exists less at the level of the narrative (the syntagmatic) than at the level of the figurative and paradigmatic.

The soap is always beginning, growing and ending, not on the plane of the linear story but on the plane of the expression; on the succession of motifs and figures that repeat themselves according to certain structure, logic and order (i.e. series of repeated figures) proper of the genre. It is a seriated melodrama; a limitless story that is ending always, closing

itself always to begin again, to enact again a whole drama in each episode, in each sequence. The soap opera extends itself infinitely by the chaining of stories in its dramatic web. But, as a chain, its diachronical, unlimited space is limited synchronically by the circular, cyclical, and repetitious nature of its dramatic units; of its rhetorical "links". On his account of a "mythic rhetoric," McGuire (1977) proposed that the apparent disorder of a myth's story is regulated by the recurrent presence of rhetorical figures. What I propose below is a preliminary attempt to read in this rhetorical purport.

The genre and the rhetoric

Soaps are one of the few televisual forms that do not compete against each other as much as they work with each other. One can speak, at least formally, of a daily four-hour program that flows through different stories without any interruption. The shifts in stories, that in other genres could be considered as interruptions, in soap operas are the very nature of the narrative. Thus, in formal and dramatic terms there is no more shift between one soap and another, than among the acts of a single episode (which can include as much as six different storylines), the scenes of a single act, or between the soap and the advertisement in between.

Raymond Williams (1974) has alleged that televisual advertisement is not an interruption, but a constitutive part of a flowing programming that never stops. In the case of soap operas, this continuity is emphasized by a genre which logic is

that of suspension. Advertisement loses its "alien" status by following the structure of the genre: small scenes are opened, make a point, disappear, and are followed by others. Scenes on the soaps as well as on advertisements tend to begin with a relatively open plane which presents the situation, and end in a close-up that literally highlights the object of the action (i.e. the character challenged; the product offered).

Semiotics of the body: A space of signification

The rhetorical unit of the soap opera seems to be the act (I would like to call it the rheme, the rhetorical unit of signification); that is, a dramatic unit that begins, develops certain conflicts, reaches a climax, and ends (see Appendix).

It has been asserted many times that soap opera is an open-ended form that resists closure and that infinitely delays resolution (Allen, 1983; Modlesky, 1982; Fiske, 1987). This lack of closure in content is, nevertheless, expressively articulated in a demarked, clear, closed interlinkage of acts. These acts are built with very precise rhetorical tools; with conventions that highlight and direct the action, announcing opening and closure, climax and suspense. The building of a smooth, flowing narrative rests on the bodies, on a spatial composition that seems to have reached an enormous grade of formal clarity.

The form of a soap opera is basically that of a gathering that is interrupted. It includes, then, the figure of the interrupter (i.e. the challenger), of the "settler" or keeper (who is in command of the situation), and of the announcement.

The settler and the interrupter are involved in a conflict that reaches its climax and ends when the "announcement," usually placed in the form of a threat, is produced. The threat both closes the act and announces a mystery that has to be solved, or a challenge that has to be faced.

The beginning of the rhetorical act is marked by the definition of those who are "in charge", that is, by the expression of what is the original order that will be disrupted. In visual terms, this is expressed by an open plane that shows the characters (or character) and their positions. This is the current state of affairs, the established situation before the action. The characters' position (their role on the action) is literally expressed by the position of their bodies. The characters with whom the action begins are located toward the center of the frame. They are the proprietors of the space, the commanders of the situation, the keepers of the actual and ephemeral order. Something then happens. The closed, ordered space is violated: somebody enters, breaks into the established space, and provokes a new definition of the situation. Literally, a door is open, a phone rings. And somebody enters, usually from the left. The challenging, alien, or unexpected tends to appear from the left, while the expected or desired does it from the right: our western way of reading, praising, and ranking (on value scales which literally go from left to right) is present in the rhetorical construction of the screen.

After the "presentation," what takes place is a negotiation

of power, as revealed on the polarities of active/passive, carrier/keeper, addresser/addressee, challenger/challenged. The resolution of the conflict, the end of the act, is marked by a "closing" close-up of the face of the keeper of the action, that is, the character who faces the last challenge, and with whom another action will be opened. Depending on the relative power of the player, depending on her/his actual function as carrier or keeper, it would tend to be situated toward the left or the right of the frame. This segmentation of the space, this peculiar way of naming the action, of making the characters carriers of functions, is what gives soap opera its feeling of predictability in spite of always new plots and conflicts. A highly precise way of naming acts and actors is involved, which gives space for always new action and, more important, for interaction. This is possible because functions are not associated with specific characters, but with their position; with their role on the production and explosion of the conflict. And this is the basic democracy of the text. Everybody has the right to be at the right. Everybody is a disrupter as well. If soap operas are open, this is because of their extreme closeness. If soap operas do not need to end, is because its eternal present is able to be past and future: it infinitely begins, develops, and ends.

The Soap Opera's Format: An Interpretation

The soap is as unpredictable as a game outcome can be, and as predictable as the game rules are. Perhaps is its very static composition, its clear conventions, its unambiguous "mise

en scene" that allows soap operas to be so "alive:" once the form is so clearly established, it is possible to play with the content, to make it unpredictable as a game can be, as a chess match, as a boxing fight, as a card game. The fact of knowing all the rules (e.g boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl) does not diminish the expectation the game produces. It increases it, for all the difference between one game and another resides in the players and their actual interaction; on their character, strategies, skills, and favorite movements. The rules of the game are fixed, and yet interaction makes it always new. As in the kaleidoscope, the possible combinations of a discrete number of elements is infinite.

It is not the end of the game that moves the enthusiast, but its materiality, its very enactment, its enlarged present, its being a work-in-project. It is not the future that moves the soap opera viewer, but the construction of an unresolved present, always open in multiple directions, always divergent. And this multiple present is prolonged through other soap operas. The overlapping of stories within one soap is duplicated by the overlapping of soap operas within the programming itself. The soap is not a story, but a universe of stories, a thousand and one nights of overlapped tales, somehow related, somehow independent.

Conclusion

The characterization of soap operas in contrast with

telenovelas can make clear some differences and coincidences that permeate these two different ways of expressing melodrama. In this sense, a generic conceptualization (Harrell and Linkugel 1980) of melodramatic serials can help to understand their motivational and archetypal, cultural and cross-cultural dimensions.

What has been attempted in this paper is an approximation to what can be called the soap operas' rhetoric of presentation. A further investigation of this perspective can highlight the relationship between soap operas and other ways of storytelling, as well as the ideological and cultural dimensions of the text's self-presentation: its rhetorical regime.

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Notes

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The "Rheme" on Soap Operas: Opening and Closing of the Acts

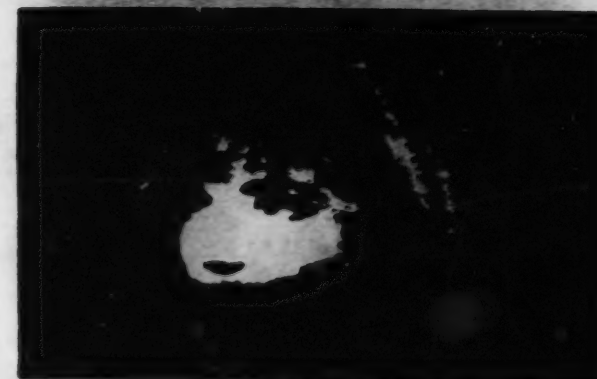
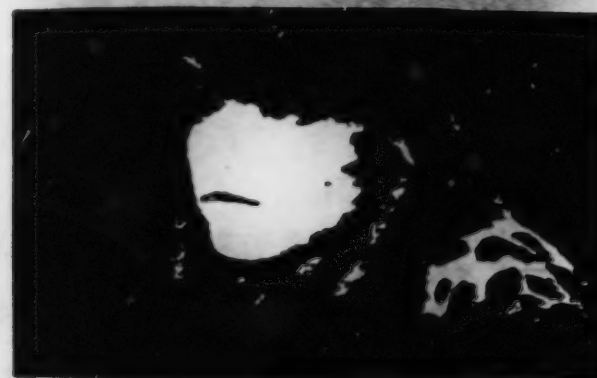
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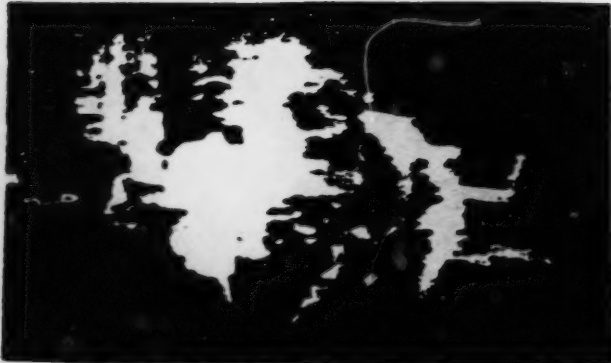
"As the World Turns"



CLOSING



OPENING



"The Young and the Restless"



"The Bold and the Beautiful"

CLOSING

